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ABSTRACT

Conversations with seven Boston-area adult basic education (ABE) program coordinators revealed the severe adverse effects of Massachusetts' new restrictive welfare reform law on literacy education programs for the poor. The new law limits cash assistance to 2 years for most welfare recipients and requires most recipients whose youngest child is school age to do at least 20 hours per week of paid or unpaid (community service) work. As a result, the number of welfare recipients attending adult basic education programs has fallen in recent months. Education is no longer encouraged--and is often actively discouraged--for recipients of public assistance. The number of classes and slots at ABE programs funded by the state welfare department to provide educational services to clients has fallen. Child-care problems, paperwork problems, lack of uniformity in applying the provisions of the law, and absence of coordination among various social service systems contribute to push students out of education programs and into low-wage jobs. The new law has severely damaged ABE programs by loss of students and loss of funding. (KC)

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by Steve Reuys

Our effort to examine the effects of recent social policy changes on the field of adult basic education and its students began in the last issue of this newsletter with an article focusing on the impact of the Career Center initiative, from the perspective of one particular program. In this issue, we look at the effects of changes in welfare policy on ABE students and programs. The article is based on conversations held last fall, some by A.L.R.I. Director David Rosen and some by the author of this article, with numerous Boston-area program coordinators. We especially want to thank them for taking the time to speak with us. Opinions expressed here are those of the author. As always, we are eager to hear about your experiences and to get your thoughts on these issues.--Ed.

Last year, Massachusetts enacted one of the most restrictive welfare "reform" laws in the nation. Along with a variety of other provisions, the law limits cash assistance to two years for most TAFDC (Temporary Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients and requires most recipients whose youngest child is school age to do at least 20 hours per week of paid or unpaid (community service) work. The importance of this law was, of course, enormous, but it should also be noted that major changes had already been taking place in welfare policy for a number of years prior to passage of this legislation. What have been the effects of the new law--and the previous policy changes--on adult basic education programs and their students? A year after passage of the welfare reform law seems like an appropriate time to attempt such an assessment.

(The effects of the law in general have been the subject of articles in the *Boston Globe*, suggesting that the law has so far failed in its attempt to move people off welfare into jobs. What figures there are (and the Weld administration has done little to track the fate of welfare recipients removed from the rolls) show the overall number of people on welfare declining, but possibly without any increase in the number who moved off welfare into work. What happened to these thousands of families? Joseph Gallant, Weld's human services secretary, in a comment evocative of pre-revolutionary France, said, "The goal is to encourage independence, and that's what we're doing. If they're not on welfare, they've obviously found a source of income on their own. Otherwise, how would they live?")

From discussions with coordinators at the seven Boston programs funded by the Department of Transitional Assistance (formerly the Department of Public Welfare) to provide adult basic education classes for DTA recipients and with coordinators at a number of other ABE programs in this area, it is clear that the number of welfare recipients attending adult basic education programs has fallen in recent months and that education is no longer encouraged--and is in fact often actively discouraged--for recipients of public assistance in Massachusetts.

As new federal welfare legislation begins to take effect, the situation may become even worse in terms of education options for welfare recipients, but DTA has already made clear that it is not interested in promoting education for its clients. As one spokeswoman said last year, "We are no longer in the human services business. Our job now is to help people who are temporarily on public assistance to get jobs." And what that means is to get clients into some job--any job--as fast as possible. Any thought of helping clients develop the long-term capability to get and retain decent jobs has been almost completely subsumed by policies that are pulling DTA out of the "education business."

What have been the effects of the recent (and not-so-recent) welfare policy changes on adult basic

education programs and their students? The following is a summary of what has been happening:

1) The number of classes and slots at adult basic education programs funded by the state Department of Transitional Assistance to provide educational services to clients has fallen. Currently, in Boston only seven programs receive funding from DTA to hold classes for DTA recipients, and these grants serve only small numbers of students. For example, one program in a large neighborhood of the city is funded to provide just one ESOL class and one EDP class for a total of twenty students; this number is typical of all the DTA-funded programs in Boston. It is rumored that next year no classes will be funded by DTA.

2) The levels of education that DTA is willing to support have been constricting over the past few years. DTA is currently only willing to fund slots at the advanced, or possibly intermediate, level of ABE or ESOL, and there has been no funding for beginning level students for some time. Thus, students at beginning levels are either turned away by programs or, if child care is still available, they can sometimes be placed in (or put on waiting lists for) classes funded by the Department of Education.

3) The length of time that students are allowed to attend an educational program has also been shrinking. Attendance is now limited to a maximum of one year. Potential students may be looking at these time limits and deciding that there's no point in starting to attend class since they wouldn't be likely to make enough progress in the time allowed. These two restrictions--on levels and on length of time--are part of an obviously intentional policy of "creaming"--that is, of serving only those people whose skills are initially rather good and who stand the best chance of being placed in a job within a year. The state has essentially ruled out education as an option for those whose abilities are lower and who are in fact in greatest need of further education.

4) DTA is providing little or no encouragement for clients to pursue educational goals, and is actively discouraging many. Getting a job--any job--as quickly as possible is the only objective that counts. Any notion of investing in education as part of a long-term strategy to promote permanent and meaningful employment has disappeared from the DTA agenda. Programs indicate that fewer clients are being referred to educational programs, fewer approvals for attending educational programs are being issued, and less support in the form of child care and transportation allowances is being granted for those trying to attend class.

5) The new work or community service requirement is forcing many students to quit school or never to start in the first place. Unless exempt (that is, with at least one child under school age in the family), most recipients are now required to work or do community service for 20 hours per week. Since welfare-funded education programs are also required to be 20 hours per week, it becomes extremely difficult to attend class while also raising a family and doing 20 hours of work per week, and the difficulty of finding after-school childcare only compounds the problem. The result is that education is usually what gets dropped first. ABE programs report that many students who had been attending class and making good progress have been forced to drop-out because of the new work requirement. Because of these difficulties facing students, one program has decided to accept only persons who are exempt from the work requirement for their DTA-funded slots. Similarly, at the college level, WETAC (the Welfare Education and Training Access Coalition) reports that across the state large numbers of DTA-recipient students at community and state colleges have had to drop out before completing their educational progams due to the new work requirement. (Last year, a section of the budget that would have allowed welfare recipients to count education toward the work/service requirement was vetoed by Governor Weld, and the effort to override his veto fell six votes shy of passage. An attempt will be made again this year to have such a provision enacted. If you're interested in supporting this effort, contact Sue Jhirad at 396-6424.)

6) The welfare paper chase is also reducing class attendance, as students are required to leave class

frequently to get various forms signed and approved. For example, they must go through a time-consuming process to get day care vouchers renewed every month, along with every time a child is out sick for a week.

7) Many students are in a general state of panic and confusion and are scrambling to find jobs rather than looking into educational options, even when these might still be open to them under the law.

8) The provisions of the new law are complicated, and its implementation has only added to the confusion. Some programs say the most common problem with the new law is that different clients are being told different things, that what particular individuals are required to do often depends on the varying interpretations of particular caseworkers, who also seem confused about the provisions of the law. This applies to educational aspects of the law, as well as others. One program reported several of their students who wound up homeless due to this confusion around implementation.

9) And finally, as one program coordinator noted, "Many people's lives are complicated, and they have multiple needs." Yet there is virtually no coordination between various social service systems, such as welfare, daycare, public schools, and adult basic education, that might help some people in putting the pieces together that are needed for them to improve their lives in a meaningful, long-term way. The new laws and regulations have made this situation worse for any public assistance recipients hoping to improve their own education.

Adult basic education *programs* have also felt the impact of welfare reform, as fewer and fewer welfare recipients become able to attend classes. For the first time, ABE programs are having difficulty filling even the small number of slots allocated for DTA recipients, which is potentially disastrous for small programs operating under these performance-based contracts. One program, after trying to recruit DTA recipients for its DTA-funded intermediate level ESOL class, was left with a half-empty class while at the same time putting 35 people who responded onto its ESOL waiting list because they were all at the beginning level.

Also, over the past few years, increasing numbers of programs have decided that they are no longer interested in receiving DTA funding, due to the unrealistic demands placed upon them. The paperwork requirements are enormous, demanding far more time than is paid for by DTA; no funds are provided for counseling at all; and teachers are paid significantly less than their peers who are paid through grants from the Department of Education.

Adult basic education programs and the community-based organizations that sponsor them are also being looked to as sites for performing community service. While having some service workers on site might be an advantage, most community agencies are not prepared and do not have the program infrastructure to handle a large number of community service volunteers.

Overall, the state's current welfare law and policies seem to be based on several highly-questionable assumptions. Two of the primary ones are: 1) that there are plenty of entry-level jobs out there at a family-supporting wage, and 2) that either many of these jobs require only basic levels of literacy and other skills or they require higher levels of literacy ability which virtually all persons on public assistance already possess. Regarding the first assumption, there is in fact now a dearth of living-wage entry-level jobs. A recent study in Illinois found that only 4% of entry-level jobs in that state pay a livable wage for a family of three, and the story in Massachusetts is unlikely to be very different. This situation is the result of many factors, including the significant fall in real wages over the past 25 years, the fall in the real value of the minimum wage over this time, the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of blue-collar manufacturing jobs, the shifting of jobs to other states or other countries, the wholesale abandonment of the inner cities and the resulting lack of employment opportunities to be found there, and the plague of corporate downsizing that has resulted in massive layoffs in recent years. The second assumption is equally

questionable: The literacy requirements for entering and retaining anything but dead-end, sub-poverty-level jobs have been rising steadily, while studies indicate that a sizable portion of the population does not possess commensurate abilities. Does a policy of "Sink or swim!-Sorry, no lessons available." make sense for helping people get off welfare and into work? What about a policy that provides the necessary education and training for those who need it, along with an economic program that emphasizes job creation, full employment, a living wage, universal health care, and sufficient affordable child care? Imagine....

In the meantime, adult basic education programs are hurt by the loss of students and of funding. But more importantly, the new welfare policies are doing damage to families. Some are winding up in shelters or on the streets; the number of young unsupervised "latch-key" kids has gone up because their mothers are required to work; visits to soup kitchens and food pantries are increasing; children with disabilities are no longer able to get the care they need. Thousands of families are being hurt by a punitive welfare policy that deprives adults (mostly single mothers) of the support needed for finding a route to long-term economic independence. The war on poverty has been replaced by a war on the poor.

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